



CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 2: 1-20; JOHN 1: 1-14
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Leslie was 14 the first time she gave birth. She had wanted a baby. It was a way to leave the chaos of her home and a mom who was drug dependent and more and more asking her daughter to help her get the drugs she needed to get through the day. This baby was a part of her quest to feel at home somewhere.

Leslie didn't even realize she was in labor until things were pretty far along. When she walked into the hospital, the staff there took over. She didn't get to consent to much of anything during the birth. She was overcome with joy when her baby was born, but she had to give the baby up for adoption.

By the time she had her fourth child years later, she was so afraid that someone would take it away like all of her other kids because she and her husband didn't have a house to live in, that she had the baby in a tent on a sweltering day in Texas. The baby was small, but he latched on and nursed. Leslie hopes he's going to be ok.¹

Birth is a thin space—life and death conflating in intense minutes, hours, days. Bodies gripped by a sacred purposeful transition—something has to change, and that change is fraught with possibility and peril.

We are here tonight, together, in this sacred space—to remember a birth, to tell again the story that defines our faith tradition.

Such a defining moment. And yet, we have basically four verses in scripture that are supposed to tell the story. In Matthew it's this line about Joseph waking up from a dream and following the angels' instructions "until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus." The next line says, "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem" but that's pretty much it in Matthew.²

In Luke, there are a few more details that lead up to the birth—the trip to Bethlehem for the registration. Then about the actual birth we get two verses in Luke:

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.³

Such a defining moment and we get four verses in the over 31,000 verses of the Bible.

So it's little wonder that humanity has tried to fill in the gaps of the story to make the story do what we want it to do.

Take your average nativity scene for instance—Mary most often looks pretty put together. That should be our first clue that we've strayed from what it was like that night in Bethlehem. You know Mary was tired. Mary was probably wearing the ancient Mediterranean version of the post-partum underwear they give you in the hospital.

She had just given birth in someone else's stable, away from home, and she was receiving visitors who were total strangers who brought their livestock along with them instead of food or a breastfeeding pillow.

The wonder of it all goes much deeper than the common sterilized version allows us to take in.

We lose something when we don't let this memory we share carry with it the truth of our humanity and the way God seeks us out. That's the whole point, after all. God comes close not outside of our experience, but fully present in our experience.

Jesus traveled through a birth canal and had an umbilical cord. Mary had a cervix and had to dilate and have contractions and push through that vice gripping sensation down deep in her abdomen.

Like many women report feeling today when they give birth, Mary may well have felt that she and her baby had the least power to make decisions of anyone in the room.

Chances are Mary was surrounded by women in the community who heard a birth was happening and who came to assist. That would have been both a relief and a feeling of utter vulnerability. Mary had to trust so many strangers along the way—including the angel who told her she would have to labor with God.

I wonder why the nativity doesn't include any midwives, any discarded cloths used to clean Mary and her new baby once he was born.

I wonder why it was so easy for the world to forget that Mary was just a girl, and that her skin was not white and neither was Jesus'. We can be certain that if Mary had been white and Jesus had been white, there would have been a few verses about that somewhere in the Bible. They would have stuck out like a sore thumb; it would have been the talk of Bethlehem.

Those shepherds who came—who felt the pull of something powerful and mysterious happening, something that could finally change things—those shepherds were marginalized people. Being a shepherd was not a respected vocation—it was a difficult, strenuous, and disdained way of life.

There were common tropes at the time about their dishonesty, their laziness, even their criminality. And they were the ones who came running—they were the ones so deeply moved by the miracle being born. They were the ones ready and willing to change.

I wonder why it is so easy for the world to appropriate this story for agendas that violate the power of the story. Like a 14 year old girl in America giving birth who is stripped of her power to consent or to make decisions for her child, people just like us, claiming this story as our own, have taken Mary's baby away from her, away from this moment, and used him to tell the story we want told.

But what we lose *is* the story that unfolded *for us*—*for* the healing of the world. And we can't heal if we don't know our story, if we continue to tell ourselves false stories, if we can't sit with the pain of our story, if we can't let the healing power of this story take hold in us.

Our world today is not that different than the world back then.

Powerful men jealously guarding their power, ignoring the impact their decisions have on regular, every day people.

Bodies moving across borders to be counted, to be commodified.

Religion weaponized to shame and to separate, to pacify and to agitate.

Women's bodies and children's bodies caught up in the systems that don't often serve them well.

Marginalized people trying to tell the world their story, but being dismissed and ignored, reviled and criminalized.

This is a story about vulnerability, marginalization, and a God who turns the world upside down. Too many Christians have been trying to avoid that truth these two millennia since. Too many Christians have been trying to use the story to protect the status quo, to deny that peace on earth means justice on earth—and that Jesus was a marginalized person who died trying to tell us the truth about ourselves, the truth that can set us free.

And it's a truth that is all around us in a world crying out for change.

Remember, birth is a thin space—life and death conflating in intense minutes, hours, days. Bodies gripped by a sacred purposeful transition—something has to change, and that change is fraught with possibility and peril.

This Christmas let the power of our birth story wash over you. It's a dangerous story, a hard-to-believe story, a story of love searching for a home.

Can you let that story wash over you?

That God loves the world so much that God decided to come into this fraught world needing us to be who we were made to be—neighbors, midwives, trustworthy friends, humble workers, responsive citizens, creatures open to mystery, people ready for the world to change—for justice and peace, for mercy and love to be born.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/24/pushed-to-the-limit-six-birth-stories-from-around-the-world>

² Matthew 1: 24-25

³ Luke 2: 6-7